WIRE—
Women's Information Resource & Exchange

New Online Service Debuts

BY KEVIN SAVETZ

For various reasons, women have always been a minority in the world of online telecommunications. The Women's Information Resource and Exchange (WIRE) is a new computer bulletin board system that's working to get women online, and provide information and develop an online community specifically for women.

Says Nancy Rhine, WIRE cofounder and development director, "Women haven't been encouraged to feel science and technology are things that they could get involved in. There hasn't been much marketing or education. Structuring of content hasn't been consciously created with women in mind. In WIRE's case, we are thinking of women all the way through, from picking the interface to choosing what information we make available."

WIRE draws its content from women's organizations, government sources, newswires, and users. Information includes a listing of Washington events and issues that women should know about, a calendar of conferences, the *Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues Update* newsletter, and international stories about women. "Our goal," says Rhine, "is to be an international network for women's interests."

While WIRE's primary market is female, men are not turned away. "We're finding quite a few men who are really supportive and interested. They want to come in and participate, and we think that's great," notes Rhine.

WHAT'S ON WIRE

WIRE offers a combination of read-only information resources, messaging forums (in which users post messages to be read later), and interactive areas (in which participants engage in real-time "chat" sessions). Forum topics include pregnancy and birth, adoption, fertility, birth control, menopause, cancer and health issues, chronic fatigue syndrome, fitness and wellness information, managing stress, home schooling, balancing career and family, career and finance, business, elder care, the environment, education, and gender equity. Adds Rhine, "There will also be a forum on women in technology—where technology is going, and what is our relationship with it, as humans and as women."

Other conferences will assist users in selecting child care facilities, locating women's organizations, and finding scholarships for women. Parenting is also covered from many angles, including lists of books and toys—as recommended by kids and parents. A area of "herstory" is also available, complete with the texts of historical documents pertinent to women, including the Seneca Falls Declaration and the Equal Rights Amendment of 1921.

WIRE will host "live" interviews, bringing experts or other prominent people ("authors, heads of companies, politicians, physicians, maybe a midwife," says Rhine) online to discuss subjects of interest.

WIRE ON THE NET

In addition, WIRE provides electronic mail to the Internet, Usenet newsgroups, and UPI newswires. Rhine explains, "We want to be a central, easily accessible online resource about women's issues and interests. We want to bring things in from the Internet and point people to other information. We can't supply everything, so we want to be a guide to other information for women online." WIRE users can join any of the Internet's mailing lists—the system administrators provide a list of Internet conferences pertaining to women's issues. Some are of general interest, and other are strictly for professionals. Topics include education, foods, kids, travel, pets, gardens, science, space, health, law, movies, and music.

EASE OF USE

WIRE's primary interface is graphical. Commands are made by pointing to onscreen items rather than via a command-line interface. (A command-line interface is available, but isn't the best way to use WIRE.) "We wanted to lower the hurdle of learning a complex interface. Women are busy, intelligent people. We want to enable them to easily get information and the interpersonal networking that goes on online," says Rhine, who hopes that as networks become easier to use, it will encourage exploration of the online world.

EARLY ADOPTERS

WIRE recently opened its virtual doors to five hundred "founding subscribers" — people who are interested in helping build the system, being early contributors, and helping to make WIRE a useful tool and enjoyable online experience for women. "Our founding subscribers will be people who want to collaborate in building this online community," Rhine says; the formal grand opening is scheduled for January.

To become a founding subscriber, call the WIRE office at (415)615-8989 and request the free software to access the system. Graphical interface software is available for Macintosh computers and IBM-compatibles running Windows. Users of other computer systems can access WIRE's text-based command-line interface.

WIRE's subscription fee is $15 per month, which includes two hours of access each month. Additional time is $2.50 hourly. Once you have the necessary software, you can connect to WIRE by a direct phone call, or via Sprintnet. (Sprintnet is a "packet-switching network" that allows computer users in most US cities to connect to WIRE by making a local phone call. Sprintnet users pay an additional hourly surcharge to offset WIRE's cost of this service; this can bring the hourly cost to as much as $7.50, depending on time of day.) Currently, only users of the Macintosh graphical software and the command-line interface can connect through Sprintnet. ■

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